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Although there is currently great emphasis placed on high school completion, it should be recognized that the credential value of the diploma has diminished over the past 59 years. The diploma has become the minimum prerequisite for a job but offers no surety of employment. The problem of the dropout is far more complex than whether or not he finishes the two years of schooling beyond the required attendance until the age of 16. Employability depends on a number of factors other than school completion--for example race, caste, socioeconomic status, health, and emotional stability. The extreme valuation which society places on the diploma "may also reflect widespread faith and vested interest in universal, free, compulsory education." Moreover, the high school diploma by itself cannot guarantee freedom from poverty and alienation. The document includes an extensive bibliography grouped under various headings. For the full paper of which this is an excerpt, see ED 021 888. (NH)

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The School Dropout Today

* This article is excerpted from the paper "The School Dropout Today" presented at the Fifth Work Conference on Curriculum and Teaching in Depressed Areas, Teachers College, Columbia University, June 20 — July 1, 1966. The full document will be available in microfiche and hard copy form from EDRS after February 1969.

Abraham J. Tannenbaum, Ph.D.

In the social and behavioral sciences a correlate often masquerades as a consequence. Human conditions that tend to go together are frequently placed in a cause-and-effect relationship that is rationalized with more wishful thinking than logic or evidence. Such is the case in popular discussions of early school withdrawal. Usually, the gambit is to show that high school dropouts are not as employable and law abiding as their graduating peers, and then to slip into the convenient conclusion that the dropout is at a disadvantage *because* he has no diploma. This leads to some clear and simple caveats for high school students. To those who are able and stable enough to earn a diploma, the message is "Stay in school or your future will be ruined". To the marginal students who are inclined to withdraw early, the message is, "Stay in school and your future will probably be saved". The first piece of advice is gratuitous since it is beamed at a group that will probably finish school anyway. The second is little better than a placebo since its audience is handicapped in so many other ways that it needs far more than a diploma to face the future successfully.

A high school diploma can be valuable in two ways. It can symbolize achievement in academic or vocational studies and it can have credential value in a society that places a high premium on school attendance regardless of how much is accomplished there. For many young people, it has served as a ticket to employment even when the job has not demanded the kind and level of skills acquired in high school. But the certificate loses its glitter as a prize to be coveted and honored when schools dilute their learning demands in order to improve their retention rates. Today, the diploma is not necessarily a mark of distinction as it once was. In the early 1920's, when nearly 80 per cent of the fifth grade pupils never finished secondary school, the median I.Q. of public high school seniors *in general* was equivalent to the median I.Q. of today's seniors *in honors classes only* (Hollingworth, 1926). It stands to reason, therefore, that a high school education was stiffer and more prestigeful at that time than it is today, when closer to two-thirds of all fifth graders eventually complete high school.

The credential value of the diploma is also diminishing as more and more adolescents are persuaded to stay on until graduation. Not much stock can be placed in a "union card" if it is within reach of the vast majority of young people. Its mere accessibility makes it the kind of possession (not unlike the elementary school diploma) that one can't do much with and can't do much without. It will not open doors to privilege for anyone who has it; but on the other hand, these doors will not open *unless* one has it. Diploma devaluation already exists in the job world as evidenced by the fact that the educational attainment of the unemployed is increasing more rapidly than that of the employed (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965b). The net effect of reducing dropout rates is to add more graduates to the army of unemployed rather than to guarantee jobs for those young people who have to be persuaded to graduate.

For the dwindling few who are unable or unwilling to earn the diploma, dropping out becomes a more terrible stigma than it ever has been, partly because they are seen as having failed at an easy task and partly because their failure classifies them as extreme non-conformists. But obviously, incomplete schooling is not their only handicap. The kind of person who drops out of school today, when the diploma is a minimum essential, is quite different from the kind who dropped out of school some fifty years ago, when the diploma was a valuable credential. He is likely to be beset by many other deterrents to life-success that would probably linger on even if he finished school. The chances are that he comes from a poor, low-prestige family, or a disenfranchised minority group. More often than not he is failing at school or suffering any number of physical and emotional handicaps. To dub him a "school dropout" and suggest by that label the cause and cure of his subsequent problems requires a good deal more evidence than we now have.

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Since the law obligates children to remain in school usually until the age of sixteen, only two years of attendance separate most dropouts from high school graduates who do not go on to college. Keeping today's dropout-prone in school for the two years so that they could graduate with their classmates is not going to help much in doing away with the factors that caused them to consider leaving school in the first place. Whatever derailed them from their journey through the grades will probably prevent them also from becoming attractive choices as employees, marriage partners, community workers, or members of the armed forces. Surprisingly, reports of research on school dropouts fail to include the social and emotional concomitant of early school withdrawal as independent variables. In most studies, the importance of a diploma for occupational success is "proven" by comparisons between the job histories of dropouts and of *unselected* graduates without regard for the fact that the two groups differ in many other ways that are perhaps even more critical to employability.

A close look at research on education and employment shows that a high school diploma can be relatively useless to some people. It has been noted, for example, that in 1964 about 25 per cent of the unemployed Negro males 18 years old and over had high school diplomas, as against 32 per cent of the employed — a difference of only 7 per cent. Comparable figures among white males, on the other hand, were 38 per cent and 57 per cent respectively — a difference of as much as 19 per cent (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965b). This finding suggests that, assuming the diploma *alone* accounts for these discrepancies, it is a more precious credential in the hands of a white adolescent than in the hands of a Negro. It also lends some credence to the hypothesis that at the lower skill levels color of skin is more important to success in landing a job than is a high school education.

With so many other factors complicating the life of the school dropout, why is so much attention given to his finishing school? Why, indeed, is he called a "school dropout" rather than a Negro who has left school, or a slum dweller who has left school, or a scholastic failure who has left school, or an emotionally disturbed adolescent who has left school? The answer can only be a matter of conjecture. Part of it may lie in the fact that it is easier to manipulate a person's educational history than to change his social status, his academic aptitude, his mental health, or the color of his skin.

Emphasis on the value of a high school diploma may also reflect widespread faith and vested interest in universal, free, compulsory education. The school rivals the church in the public's image of an institution that can have a powerful social impact among the masses. Many are convinced that it can cure social ills and personal defects if a proper dosage of schooling is administered with enough skill and patience. In our society, education is above criticism, despite the fact that educators are fair game for attack. Its alleged bounty so dazzles public imagination that hardly anybody ever bothers to find out what it *cannot* do even under the best of circumstances. Who would dare argue that achieving 100 per cent school retention is *not* a desirable goal? Certainly not industry and the labor unions, since they want to keep unskilled young people in school — and out of the glutted job market — for as long as possible. Certainly not the school administrator whose school subsidies are computed on a per capita attendance formula. Therefore, by emphasizing the importance of finishing school, the public champions a non-controversial cause that is in the best interests of everybody concerned, and thus relieves itself of the responsibility for cataloging the dropout's *multiple* handicaps and planning complex, expensive programs of social rehabilitation. This is not to suggest that education is something of an opiate and should be exposed as such. It is, in fact, as indispensable to personal fulfillment as basic nutrition is to physical subsistence. However, it cannot guarantee good fortune any more than basic nutrition can guarantee good health.

The prime targets for "Stay in School" campaigns are the impoverished, lower-class groups, with their disproportionately high non-white membership, who are vastly over-represented in the nation's dropout population. Such pleas often create the impression that a high school diploma can go a long way toward reversing the deprivation effects of their *total* environment and upbringing. This is purely euphoric. Perfecting school retention rates in depressed areas won't do much by way of combating poverty and alienation. However, there isn't a comprehensive plan that stands a chance of success without a strong educational component. No matter how ingenious and costly are the social engineering strategies for bringing privilege to the slum youth who drops out of school, he will become increasingly conspicuous as one of the near-vanishing few in his age group who could not or would not graduate. He needs the credential to show for his years of schooling, even if his achievement is minimal, because the spirit of the times demands it. What is more, he needs to show satisfactory scholastic achievement because the criterion for minimum essentials in education is rising. We are fast approaching the time when a child from an underprivileged environment will be doomed to a life of economic dependency and stautus depression unless he can master even more academic skills than are necessary to earn the high school diploma.

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